

Is Your Lead Really Leading?

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IT'S YOUR LEAD — but is anybody following? Do your words, like the aroma of fresh-baked bread, arouse the curiosity of readers and lead them to explore further?

Every news story, feature story, newsletter or bulletin has what is called a "lead." The name refers to the first paragraph or two, probably because it comes at the beginning of the story. But in the world of real readers, the lead is the device you use to entice people to read your message — all the way to the end.

Make your lead intense, direct, exciting and enthusiastic — make it convey to your reader that you have a message you just have to share — and your "friendly persuasion" will lead their eyes and interest down across the column. It's your way of selling yourself — by remote control.

What do you need for a good lead? A message, someone to tell it to, and a selection of words for which you both have the same meaning. And, to get those words on paper, you'll need a pen, a typewriter or a considerate secretary.

For a news story lead, your best outline is the five W's: Who, What, Why (or How), When and Where. Get those in your lead and your reader will have almost as complete a record as the IRS. Use those W's as you would building blocks, so they provide a strong foundation for the rest of your story.

Study the sequence that will be of most interest to your reader. If you know your reader well enough — dairyman, homemaker, young married, 4-H advisor, legislator — you will know which of the W's is most important to him or her. Start with that W, and work the others in according to their significance to your reader.

If your story is a feature article, the lead is just as vital. However, this time, you don't need to cram all five W's in the first couple of paragraphs. In fact, if your lead captures your reader's interest, you can sprinkle the W's all the way to the end of the story. But don't let the more leisurely pace fool you; your lead is your chance to gather followers — an audience for your message.

Jump into your story in a positive way. Judges in the Ohio County Agent's 1976 Public Information Awards Program recently rated down a very well written column. The agent began his column something like this, "I don't have much to tell you, but here are a few items." The judges also criticized a good news letter because of its weak lead.

Yes, regardless of how interesting or useful your message may be to a reader, your lead must gain his attention, or he will pass it by for other, perhaps less important, stories.

Some years ago, instructors for the Dale Carnegie Course at Dayton, Ohio, literally beat the table for an enthusiastic beginning to any speech. They insisted that if you can hold an audience for two minutes, you can hold it a lot longer. Those first minutes are crucial, just as the lead of your story.

There are many reasons for writing: a permanent record, a copy that can be edited to sharpen focus, a way to send the same message to many readers. But the main reason we write is that we can't be there; otherwise we could deliver the message in person.

In short, writing a story for others to read is like fishing. We cast our most appealing lead way out yonder — beyond our reach — fishing for attention. The person (or fish) we want to reach may be as eager to get the message as we are to get it to him. Still, he may have to be sold on the idea.

Jack Spaven, Vermont Extension Editor, says a newspaper reflects more about its editor than his mirror. Your lead can do just that for you. It reflects how strongly you feel about your message and how well you have identified your reader and his needs.

So when you get a hot idea, calm yourself just enough to get it on paper. Put your best lead forward and send it to your editor or mailing list. Remember, you are sending a bit of you; be sure it is the picture you want to describe.

Oh yes, once you have your lead, the rest of the story will fall in behind it. If you have a good lead, you will certainly have a following.